BEFORE NICAEA

A Chronological Investigation of God, Jesus, and the Spirit

in the New Testament Texts

Reading the Apostolic Witness Without Assuming the Later Creeds

An Expanded Study with Additional Verses and Analysis

Expanded and developed from an original investigation

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Introduction: Why Chronology Matters

The strongest way to investigate the Trinity question is to proceed chronologically and to begin with the texts themselves rather than with later doctrinal conclusions. The first question is not “What did the Council of Nicaea say in AD 325?” but rather: How did Jesus describe God, himself, and their relationship? How did the earliest apostles preach? What language did they actually use?

This study deliberately sets aside the later philosophical categories of “one essence, three co-equal, co-eternal persons” in order to hear the New Testament on its own terms. Only after listening carefully to Jesus and the apostles should we ask how later generations attempted to systematize what they heard.

The approach is simple: start with Jesus’ own words, move to the earliest public preaching recorded in Acts, then examine the letters of Paul and the other apostolic writings, and only then confront the most elevated Christological texts. Throughout, additional verses are supplied and linguistic or contextual analysis is offered so that the reader can weigh the evidence.

The goal is not to defend a predetermined conclusion—whether classic Trinitarianism, unitarianism, or any other system—but to let the primary sources speak as clearly as possible.

Part I — Jesus Himself

The first and most important witness is Jesus of Nazareth. Whatever later theology concludes, it must ultimately be accountable to the way Jesus spoke about God and about himself.

Chapter 1: The Shema and the One God

When a scribe asked Jesus which commandment was the most important, Jesus answered by quoting the foundational confession of Israel:

> **Mark 12:28–29**
>
> *"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'"*

Jesus begins with the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4). He does not revise it, expand it, or qualify it. He affirms the absolute oneness of God. This is the starting point for any investigation of New Testament Christology.

The same confession appears elsewhere in Jesus' teaching. In Matthew 22:37 and Luke 10:27 the parallel accounts likewise place the love of the one God at the center of the Law. Jesus never suggests that the monotheism of Israel needed correction.

Additional Old Testament background strengthens the force of this starting point. The prophets repeatedly insist that Yahweh alone is God:

> **Isaiah 43:10–11**
>
> *"You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior."*
>
> **Isaiah 44:6**
>
> *"This is what the Lord says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God."*
>
> **Isaiah 45:5–6**
>
> *"I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God… so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting people may know there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other."*

Jesus, a first-century Jew addressing other Jews, takes this monotheistic framework as given. Any account of his identity must therefore explain how language about him relates to the one God he himself confessed.

Chapter 2: The Only True God (John 17)

In the high-priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus makes a statement of exceptional clarity:

> **John 17:3**
>
> *"Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."*

The structure is unambiguous:

- The Father is identified as “the only true God.”
- Jesus is identified as the one whom that God has sent.

Jesus is praying to the Father. He does not address himself as the only true God; he addresses the Father with that title. The distinction is not a later theological construction—it is present in Jesus’ own prayer.

The same pattern appears throughout the Gospel of John. Jesus repeatedly speaks of the Father as the one who sent him (John 5:23–24, 36–38; 6:29, 38–39, 44, 57; 7:16, 28–29; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 12:44–45, 49; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:18, 21, 23, 25). The “sent one” is consistently distinguished from the “Sender.”

John 17:3 therefore stands as a primary data point: Jesus himself locates “the only true God” in the Father and describes himself as the one sent by that God.

Chapter 3: Jesus’ Relationship Language

Jesus’ own statements about his relationship to the Father repeatedly emphasize both distinction and subordination in function and authority.

> John 14:28
>
> *“You heard me say, ‘I am going away and I am coming back to you.’ If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.”*

The statement is direct. Jesus does not say “the Father is greater than me in my incarnate state only” or offer a philosophical qualification. He simply affirms that the Father is greater.

> John 5:19
>
> *“Jesus gave them this answer: ‘Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.’”*

The Son’s activity is derivative. He does not act independently; he mirrors the Father.

> John 5:30
>
> *“By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.”*

> Mark 13:32
>
> *“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”*

Here Jesus explicitly excludes himself from knowledge that belongs solely to the Father. Whatever else one concludes about the Son’s status, the text records a real limitation in knowledge relative to the Father.

> Matthew 24:36
>
> *parallels the same saying.*

After the resurrection Jesus continues to speak of the Father as “my God”:

> John 20:17
>
> *“Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’”*

Even in his risen state, Jesus refers to the Father as “my God.” The distinction is not dissolved by the resurrection.

These texts form a consistent pattern: Jesus distinguishes himself from the Father, acknowledges the Father’s superiority in certain respects, and continues to speak of the Father as his God.

Part II — The Earliest Apostolic Preaching

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostles began to preach publicly. Their earliest recorded sermons provide crucial evidence of how the first generation of believers spoke about God and Jesus.

Chapter 4: Peter's Pentecost Sermon

Peter's sermon in Acts 2 is the first major public proclamation after the resurrection. It was delivered to Jews who already confessed one God.

> **Acts 2:22**
>
> *"Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know."*

Peter's language is carefully structured:

- God accredited Jesus.
- God performed the works through Jesus.

Jesus is presented as the agent through whom God acted, not as the ultimate source of the action.

> **Acts 2:32**
>
> *"God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it."*

Again the subject is God: God raised Jesus. Peter does not say that Jesus raised himself (though John 10:18 records Jesus claiming authority to take up his life again; the early apostolic preaching consistently attributes the resurrection to God the Father).

> **Acts 2:36**
>
> *"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."*

This is one of the most significant statements in the earliest preaching. God made Jesus both Lord and Messiah. The exaltation is an act of God upon Jesus. Jesus is the one whom God has exalted to the position of Lord and Messiah.

The same pattern continues in Peter's later preaching:

> **Acts 3:13**
>
> *"The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus."*
>
> **Acts 3:15**
>
> *"You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead."*
>
> **Acts 4:10**
>
> *"…it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead…"*
>
> **Acts 5:30–31**
>
> *"The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior…"*

Across these early sermons the consistent pattern is: God acts; Jesus is the one acted upon and

exalted. God raises, God glorifies, God makes Lord and Messiah, God exalts to his right hand.

Chapter 5: Stephen's Vision

Just before his death, Stephen receives a vision:

> **Acts 7:55–56**
>
> *"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'"*

Two figures are distinguished: the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God's right hand. Stephen does not describe Jesus as the Father or as identical with God. The spatial language of "right hand" itself implies distinction—one who stands beside another.

This vision language is consistent with Psalm 110:1, which the early church applied to Jesus: "The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand…'" The two "Lords" in the psalm are already distinguished, and the New Testament writers maintain that distinction.

Chapter 6: Paul's Foundational Formulations

Paul provides some of the clearest and most carefully worded statements about the relationship between God and Jesus.

One God, the Father — One Lord, Jesus Christ

> **1 Corinthians 8:4–6**
>
> *"We know that 'An idol is nothing at all in the world' and that 'There is no God but one.' Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live."*

This passage is decisive for any investigation that seeks to hear Paul on his own terms. Paul affirms:

- There is one God — identified as the Father.
- There is one Lord — identified as Jesus Christ.

Paul does not say "one God consisting of three persons." His formulation is different. The one God is the Father; the one Lord is Jesus. The prepositions further distinguish their roles: all things are from the Father and through the Son.

A similar pattern appears in Ephesians 4:4–6:

> **Ephesians 4:4–6**
>
> *"There is one body and one Spirit… one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."*

Again: one Lord, one God and Father.

Jesus Has a God

Paul repeatedly speaks of the Father as the God of Jesus Christ:

> **1 Corinthians 11:3**
>
> *"But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man,*

and the head of Christ is God."

Ephesians 1:17

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation…"

Romans 15:6

"…so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

2 Corinthians 1:3

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort…"

2 Corinthians 11:31

"The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying."

Ephesians 1:3

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ…"

Colossians 1:3

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ…"

The cumulative force of these statements is difficult to ignore. Paul consistently speaks of the Father as the God of Jesus Christ.

The Final Subjection of the Son

Perhaps the most striking passage is 1 Corinthians 15:

1 Corinthians 15:27–28

"For he 'has put everything under his feet.' Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all."

Paul's sequence is clear:

1. God puts everything under Christ.
2. The Son himself will then be made subject to God.
3. The final state is that God may be all in all.

This is not the language of two completely equal persons occupying interchangeable roles. It presents a Father–Son relationship characterized by authority and ultimate submission. The goal of the entire process is the supremacy of God.

Related texts reinforce the same hierarchical pattern:

1 Timothy 2:5

"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus…"

1 Corinthians 3:23

"…and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."

Part III — High Christology Texts

Any honest investigation must also confront the passages that ascribe the highest possible status to Jesus. These texts cannot be dismissed; they must be weighed carefully alongside the others.

Chapter 7: The Word Was God (John 1)

John 1:1 is one of the strongest texts used in discussions of Jesus' divinity:

> John 1:1
>
> *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."*

The verse contains three clauses:

4. The Word was in the beginning.
5. The Word was with God (pros ton theon).
6. The Word was God (theos ēn ho logos).

Crucially, even this elevated text distinguishes the Word from God: "the Word was with God." The Greek preposition pros indicates a relationship of presence or orientation toward another. The Word is not simply identical with "God" in an undifferentiated sense.

The third clause has generated extensive linguistic discussion. In Greek the word theos ("God") appears without the definite article, while "the Word" has the article. Some interpreters argue that the anarthrous theos functions qualitatively ("the Word was divine" or "what God was, the Word was"). Others maintain that it still predicates full deity. The debate is real and longstanding; it cannot be settled by mere assertion.

John 1:14 then identifies the Word:

> John 1:14
>
> *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

The Word who was with God and was God became flesh. The distinction between the Word and God remains even as the highest possible status is ascribed to the Word.

Related texts in John continue the pattern of high status combined with distinction:

> John 1:18
>
> *"No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known."*

(Textual variants exist here; some manuscripts read "only begotten Son," others "only begotten God." Either reading still presents the Son in intimate relationship with the Father while ascribing unique status to him.)

Chapter 8: Thomas's Confession (John 20:28)

After seeing the risen Jesus, Thomas declares:

> John 20:28
>
> *"Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'"*

This is one of the most direct ascriptions of the title "God" to Jesus in the New Testament. It cannot be brushed aside. Thomas addresses Jesus with language that, in a Jewish context, is extraordinarily elevated.

Yet the same Gospel that records this confession also records Jesus calling the Father "the only true God" (John 17:3) and referring to the Father as "my God" (John 20:17). The tension is internal to the Gospel of John itself. Any coherent reading must account for both the high confession of Thomas and the consistent distinction Jesus maintains between himself and the Father.

Possible interpretive approaches include:

- Thomas is recognizing in Jesus the full presence and revelation of the one God.
- The language is functional or representational (Jesus is God-for-us).
- The confession reflects an early and profound sense of Jesus' unique divine status while still operating within a framework that distinguishes him from the Father.

The text itself does not resolve the philosophical question; it simply records the confession.

Chapter 9: The Christ Hymn (Philippians 2)

Philippians 2:6–11 is widely regarded as an early Christian hymn or confessional piece:

> **Philippians 2:6–11**
>
> *"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

Several observations are important:

7. Christ is described as existing "in the form of God" (en morphē theou).
8. He does not exploit equality with God for his own advantage.
9. He empties himself, taking the form of a servant.
10. Therefore God exalted him and gave him the name above every name.
11. The ultimate goal is "to the glory of God the Father."

Once again the sequence is: Christ humbles himself; God exalts him. The exaltation is an act of God. The final doxology is directed to the glory of God the Father. Even in this exalted hymn, the distinction and the hierarchical movement remain visible.

The application of Isaiah 45:23 ("every knee will bow") to Jesus is remarkable. In its original context the text speaks of Yahweh. The early Christians applied Yahweh-language to Jesus while still affirming that the exaltation serves the glory of the Father. This dual movement—highest possible language for Jesus combined with continued reference to the Father as God—is characteristic of much New Testament Christology.

Part IV — The Holy Spirit and the Emerging Pattern

Chapter 10: The Spirit in the New Testament

The New Testament speaks frequently of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is active in creation, prophecy, the conception of Jesus, his baptism, his ministry, the life of the church, and the inner life of believers.

Jesus speaks of the Spirit as "another advocate" whom the Father will send in his name (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). The Spirit is distinguished from both the Father and the Son in these texts. The Spirit "proceeds from the Father" (John 15:26) and is sent by the Father and by the Son.

Paul can speak of the Spirit as the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ in close connection (Romans 8:9–11). The Spirit is the means by which believers experience both the Father and the Son.

At the same time, the Spirit is never described in the New Testament with the same independent personal agency or the same range of titles that are applied to the Father and the Son. The Spirit is not said to have a "God," nor is the Spirit the object of prayer in the same way. The Spirit's role is consistently instrumental and relational—sent, given, poured out, dwelling in believers.

This is not to deny the Spirit's importance or distinctness; it is simply to observe the actual contours of New Testament language.

Chapter 11: Triadic Passages

Certain passages name the Father, the Son, and the Spirit together:

> Matthew 28:19
>
> *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*

Three are named together under a singular "name." This is significant. Yet the verse does not explicitly state that the three are one God, nor does it supply the later philosophical definition of co-equal, co-eternal persons sharing one essence.

> 2 Corinthians 13:14
>
> *"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."*

Again the three appear together in a benediction. The structure is graceful and balanced, but it does not define the ontological relationship among the three.

Other triadic texts include 1 Corinthians 12:4–6, Ephesians 4:4–6, and 1 Peter 1:2. In each case the three are coordinated, yet the New Testament never pauses to explain the metaphysical relationship in the terms that later became standard.

The later theological conclusion—"one essence, three co-equal, co-eternal persons"—is an interpretive synthesis that goes beyond the explicit wording of these passages. Whether that synthesis is the best or necessary reading is a question for further theological and historical reflection; it is not a direct quotation from the New Testament itself.

Part V — Synthesis and Questions

Chapter 12: What the Texts Clearly Affirm

If we read the New Testament on its own terms, setting the later creeds temporarily to one side, several conclusions emerge with considerable clarity:

1. There is one God.

Jesus affirms the Shema. Paul affirms that there is no God but one. The entire New Testament operates within Jewish monotheism.

2. The Father is repeatedly and primarily called God.

"One God, the Father" (1 Cor 8:6). "The God of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:17 and many parallels). "The only true God" (John 17:3).

3. Jesus is distinct from the Father.

He is the one sent by the Father. He prays to the Father. He stands at the right hand of God. He has a God. He will ultimately be subjected to God.

4. Jesus is nevertheless given extraordinarily high status.

He is called Lord in ways that echo Yahweh texts. He is the Word who was with God and was God. Thomas calls him "my Lord and my God." He is in the form of God. Every knee will bow to him. He is the agent of creation and the one through whom all things exist.

5. Jesus is subordinate to the Father in certain clear respects.

"The Father is greater than I." The Son can do nothing of himself. The Son does not know the day or hour. God is the head of Christ. The Son will be subjected so that God may be all in all.

6. The Spirit is real, active, and distinct, yet described primarily in relational and instrumental terms.

The Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son, dwells in believers, and is coordinated with the Father and the Son in several passages, without receiving the same range of independent titles or narrative agency.

Chapter 13: The Tension and the Later Development

The New Testament therefore presents a genuine tension: the strongest possible affirmation of one God, the consistent identification of that God as the Father, the clear distinction and functional subordination of the Son, and yet the ascription to the Son of language and status that in a Jewish context is breathtakingly high.

The Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and the subsequent development of Trinitarian doctrine were attempts to resolve this tension in a particular philosophical and polemical context (especially the controversy with Arius). The creed's language of homoousios ("of the same substance") and the later refinement of "three persons, one essence" are not simple restatements of New Testament wording. They are interpretive and constructive moves that sought to protect both monotheism and the full divinity of the Son.

Whether those moves are the only possible or the best possible reading of the apostolic texts is a question that continues to be debated. What cannot be debated is that the New Testament itself does not yet speak in the technical vocabulary of the fourth- and fifth-century councils.

An honest chronological investigation therefore ends with the recognition that the later doctrine is a development—an attempt to systematize and defend what the first Christians believed and experienced—rather than a direct transcription of the earliest language.

Conclusion: Reading Honestly

The purpose of this study has been to listen carefully to Jesus and the apostles before consulting the later creeds. The result is a picture that is both clear and unresolved in certain respects.

There is one God. That God is the Father. Jesus is the unique Son, the Messiah, the Lord, the one through whom God acted, the one whom God raised and exalted, the one who shares the name and the glory of God in ways that astonished his first followers. The Spirit is the presence and power of God active in the world and in the church.

How exactly these realities cohere—how the highest possible language about Jesus relates to the absolute oneness of God and the consistent distinction between Father and Son—remains the central question that later theology sought to answer. The New Testament supplies the data; the creeds supply one influential interpretation of that data.

Readers are invited to continue the investigation for themselves, returning always to the texts in their historical and literary context, and allowing the chronological priority of Jesus and the apostles to shape the conversation.

Appendix: Additional Key Texts

The following passages further illustrate the patterns discussed above. They are offered for continued study.

On the One God and the Father

Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 43–45; Mark 12:29; John 17:3; 1 Corinthians 8:4–6; Ephesians 4:6; 1 Timothy 2:5; James 2:19.

On Jesus Having a God / Being Distinct

John 20:17; Romans 15:6; 2 Corinthians 1:3; 11:31; Ephesians 1:3, 17; Colossians 1:3; Hebrews 1:9; Revelation 3:12.

On Subordination and Authority

John 5:19, 30; 14:28; Mark 13:32; 1 Corinthians 11:3; 15:27–28; 3:23.

On High Status and Divine Language Applied to Jesus

John 1:1, 14, 18; 20:28; Philippians 2:6–11; Colossians 1:15–20; Hebrews 1:1–4; Titus 2:13 (debated); 2 Peter 1:1 (debated); Revelation 1:17–18; 22:13.

On the Spirit

John 14–16; Acts 2; Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 12; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:4–6.

— End —